

CHAPTER VIII

THE START

Food was their first consideration, and to provide it Leonard bade Otter cut the lump of raw meat into strips and set them upon the rocks to dry in the broiling sun. Then they sorted their goods and selected such of them as they could carry.

Alas! they were but few. A blanket apiece--a spare pair of boots apiece--some calomel and sundries from the medicine-chest--a shot gun and the two best rifles and ammunition--a compass, a water bottle, three knives, a comb, and a small iron cooking-pot made up the total--a considerable weight for two men and a woman to drag across mountains, untravelled plains, and swamps. This baggage was divided into three loads, of which Soa's was the lightest, and that of Otter weighed as much as the other two put together.

"It was nothing," he said, "he could carry the three if need were;" and so great was the dwarf's strength that Leonard knew this to be no idle boast.

At length all was prepared, and the articles that remained were buried in the cave together with the mining tools. It was not likely that they would ever return to seek them; more probably they will lie there till, thousands of years hence, they are dug up and become priceless relics

of the Anglo-African age. Still they hid them on the chance. Leonard had melted the fruits of their mining into little ingots. In all there were about a hundred ounces of almost pure gold--the price of three men's lives! Half of these ingots he placed with the ruby in the belt about his middle, and half he gave to Otter, who hid them in his bundle. Leonard's first idea was to leave the bullion, because it entailed the carrying of extra weight; but he remembered in time that gold is always useful, and nowhere more so than among Portuguese and Arab slave-drivers.

By evening everything was ready, and when the edge of the moon showed above the horizon, Leonard rose, and lifting his load, fastened it upon his shoulders with the loops of hide which had been prepared, Otter and Soa following his example. It was their plan to travel by night so long as the state of the moon served them, for thus they would escape the terrible heat and lessen the danger of being observed.

"Follow me in a few minutes," said Leonard to Otter; "you will find me by the donga."

The dwarf nodded. A quarter of an hour later he started also with Soa and found his master standing bareheaded by his brother's grave, taking a mute farewell of that which lay beneath before he left it for ever to its long sleep in the untrodden wilderness. It was a melancholy parting, but there have been many such in the African fever belt.

With one last look Leonard turned and joined his companions. Then, having taken counsel with them and with the compass, he set his face to the mountain and his heart to the new adventures, hopes, and fears that were beyond it. The past was done with, it lay buried in yonder grave, but by the mercy of God he was still a man, living beneath the sunlight, and the future stretched away before him. What would it bring? He cared little; experience had taught him the futility of anxieties as to the future. Perchance a grave like those which he had left, perchance wealth, love, and honour. Whatever the event he would strive to meet it with patience, dignity, and resignation. It was not his part to ask questions or to reason why; it was his part to struggle on and take such guerdon as it pleased Providence to send him.

Thus thought Leonard, and this is the right spirit for an adventurer to cultivate. It is the right spirit in which to meet the good and ill of life--that greatest of adventures which every one of us must dare. He who meets them thus and holds his heart pure and his hands clean will lay himself down to sleep without a sigh or a regret when mountain, swamp, river, and forest all are travelled, and the unknown innumerable treasure, buried from the olden time far out of reach of man's sight and knowledge, at last is opened to his gaze.

So Leonard started, and his hopes were high notwithstanding the desperate nature of their undertaking. For here it must be confessed that the undesirable element of superstition still held fast upon his mind, and now with some slight cause. Had not his brother spoken of

wealth that he should win by the aid of a woman? And had not a woman come to him, bearing in her hand a jewel which, if real, was in itself worth a moderate fortune; promising also, with the help of another woman, to lead him to a land where many such might be found? Yes, these things were so, and it may be pardoned to Leonard if, setting aside the theory of coincidence, he began to believe that the end would be as the beginning had been, that the great adventure would be achieved and the wealth be won.

We shall not need to follow the footsteps of Leonard Outram and his companions day by day. For a week they travelled on, journeying mostly by night as they had proposed. They climbed mountains, they struggled through swamps and forests, they swam rivers. Indeed one of these was in flood, and they never could have crossed it had it not been for Otter's powers of natation. Six times did the dwarf face the torrent, bearing their goods and guns held above the water with one hand. On the seventh journey he was still more heavily weighted, for, with some assistance from Leonard, he must carry the woman Soa, who could swim but little. But he did it, and without any great fatigue. It was not until Otter was seen stemming a heavy current that his vast strength could be measured. Here, indeed, his stunted stature was a positive advantage, for it offered the less surface for the water to act upon.

So they travelled forward, sometimes hungry, sometimes full of meat, and even of what were better, of milk and corn. For the country was not entirely deserted; occasionally they came to scattered kraals, and were

able to obtain provisions from their peaceful inhabitants in return for some such trifle as an empty cartridge of brass. At first Leonard was afraid lest Soa should tire, but notwithstanding her years and the hardships and sufferings which she had undergone, she showed wonderful endurance--endurance so wonderful that he came to the conclusion that it was her spirit which supported the frailty of her body, and the ever-present desire to rescue one whom she loved as a surly dog sometimes loves its master. However this might be, she pushed forward with the rest, rarely speaking except to urge them onwards.

On the eighth night of their journey they halted upon the crest of a high mountain. The moon had set, and it was impossible to go further; moreover, they were weary with long marching. Wrapping themselves up in their blankets--for here the air was piercingly cold--they lay down beneath the shelter of some bushes to sleep till dawn. It was Otter who woke them. "Look, Baas," he said to Leonard, "we have marched straight. There below us is the big river, and there far to the right is the sea."

They looked. Some miles from them, across the great plain of bush that merged gradually into swamp, lay that branch of the Zambesi which they would reach. They could not see it, indeed, for its face was hid by a dense cloak of soft white mist that covered it like a cloud. But there it was, won at last, and there away to the eastward shone the wide glitter of the sea, flecked with faint lines of broken billows whence the sun rose in glory.

"See, Baas," said Otter, when they had satisfied themselves with the beautiful sight, "yonder, some five hours' march from here, the mountains curve down to the edge of the river. Thither we must go, for it is on the further side of those hills that the great swamp lies where the Yellow Devil has his place. I know the spot well; I have passed it twice."

They rested till noonday; but that night, before the moon rose, they stood on the curve of the mountain, close down to the water's edge. At length she came up, and showed them a wonderful scene of desolation. Beyond the curve of hills the mountains trended out again to the south, gradually growing lower till at last they melted into the skyline.

In the vast semicircle thus formed ran the river, spotted with green islands, while between it and the high ground, over a space which varied from one mile at the narrowest to twenty miles in width at the broadest of the curve, was spread a huge and dismal swamp, marked by patches of stagnant water, clothed with reeds which grew to the height of small trees, and exhaling a stench as of the rottenness of ages.

The loneliness of the place was dreadful, its waste and desolation were appalling. And yet it lived with a life of its own. Wild fowl flew in wedges from the sea to feed in its recesses, alligators and hippopotami splashed in the waters, bitterns boomed among the rushes, and from every pool and quagmire came the croaking of a thousand frogs.

"Yonder runs the slave road, or yonder it once ran," said Otter,

pointing to the foot of a hill.

"Let us go and see," answered Leonard; "we can follow it for a while and camp."

They climbed down the hill. At its foot Otter cast backwards and forwards among the bushes like a hound. Then he held up his hand and whistled.

"I thought so," he said, as the others drew near; "the path is still the same. Look, Baas."

As he spoke he broke down the branches of a creeping bush with his strong foot. Among them lay the mouldering skeleton of a woman, and by her side that of a child.

"Not long dead," said Otter phlegmatically, "perhaps two weeks. Ah! the Yellow Devil leaves a spoor that all may follow."

Soa bent over the bones and examined them. "One of Mavoom's people," she said; "I know the fashion of the anklets."

Then they marched on for two hours or more, till at length they came to a spot where the trail ran to the edge of the water and stopped.

"What now, Otter?" said Leonard.

"Here the slaves are put on boats, Baas," the dwarf answered. "The boats should be hidden yonder," and he pointed to some thick reeds. "There too they 'weed the corn,' killing out the weakly ones, that they may not be burdened with them. Let us go and look."

They went, Otter leading the way. Presently he halted. "The boats are gone," he said, "all except one canoe; but the 'weeds' lie in a heap as of old."

He was right. Piled in a little open space lay the bodies of some thirty men, women, and children recently dead. In other spaces close by were similar heaps, but these were of bleached bones on which the moonlight shone brightly--mementoes of former sacrifices. Quite close to the first pile of dead was a mooring-place where at least a dozen flat-bottomed boats had been secured, for their impress could yet be seen in the sand. Now they were gone with the exception of the canoe, which was kept there, evidently to facilitate the loading and launching of the large boats.

Nobody made any comment. The sight was beyond comment, but a fierce desire rose in Leonard's heart to come face to face with this "Yellow Devil" who fattened on the blood and agony of helpless human beings, and to avenge them if he might.

"The light is going, we must camp here till the morning," he said after

a while.

And there they camped in this Golgotha, this place of bones, every one of which cried to heaven for vengeance.

The night wind swept over them whispering in the giant reeds, fashioning the mists into fantastic shapes that threw strange shadows on the inky surface of the water as it crept slowly to the sea. From time to time the frogs broke into a sudden chorus of croaking, then grew silent again; the heron cried from afar as some alligator or river-horse disturbed its rest, and from high in air came the sound of the wings of wild-fowl that travelled to the ocean. But to Leonard's fancy all these various voices of nature were as one voice that spoke from the piles of skeletons gleaming faintly in the uncertain starlight and cried, "Oh! God, how long shall iniquity have power on the earth? Oh! God, how long shall thy Hand be stayed?"

The darkness passed, the sun shone out merrily, and the travellers arose, brushed the night-dew from their hair, and ate a scanty meal, for they must husband such food as they had with them. Then, as though by common consent, they went to the canoe, bailed her out, and started, Leonard and Otter using the paddles.

Now it was that the dwarf's marvellous memory for locality came into play. Without him they could not have gone a mile, for their course ran through numberless lagoons and canals, cut by nature and the current

in the dense banks of reeds. There was nothing to enable them to distinguish one of these canals from another; in truth they all formed a portion of this mouth of the river. There were no landmarks to guide them; everywhere spread a sea of swamp diversified by rush-clothed islands, which to the inexperienced eye presented few points of difference. This was the road that Otter led them on unfalteringly; ten years had passed since he had travelled it, but he never even hesitated. Time upon time they came to new openings in the reeds leading this way and that. Then for a moment the dwarf would consider, and, lifting his hand, point out which water-way they should choose, and they followed it.

Thus they went on for the most part of that day, till towards evening they reached a place where the particular canal that they were following suddenly divided itself into two, one branch running north and one in a southerly direction.

"Which way, Otter?" asked Leonard.

"Nay, Baas, I know not. The water has changed; there was no land here, the cut went straight on."

This was a serious matter, for one false step in such a labyrinth meant that they would be lost utterly. For long they debated which stream to take, and at last decided to try that on the left hand, which Otter thought ran more nearly in the true direction. They had already started

in pursuance of his advice when Soa, who had remained silent hitherto, suggested that they should first go a little way down the right-hand stream on the chance of finding a clue. Leonard demurred, but as the woman seemed bent upon it, he yielded, and turning the boat they paddled her some three hundred yards in this new direction. As there was nothing to be seen, however, Otter began to put her about again.

"Stay, White Man," said Soa, who had been searching the surface of the water with her quick eyes, "what is that thing yonder?" and she pointed to a clump of reeds about forty yards away, among which some small white object was just discernible.

"Feathers, I think," Leonard answered, "but we will go and see." In another moment they were there.

"It is paper, Baas," said Otter in a low voice, "paper stuck on a reed."

"Lift it carefully," answered Leonard in the same tone, for his anxiety was keen. How came it that they found paper fixed to a reed in such a place as this?

Otter obeyed, laying the sodden sheet on the thwart of the canoe before Leonard, who with Soa examined it closely.

"This is a leaf from that holy book in which my mistress reads," said the woman with conviction; "I know the shape of it well. She has torn

the paper out and affixed it on the reed as a sign to any who might come after her."

"It looks like it," said Leonard; "that was a good thought of yours to turn up here, old lady." Then he bent down and read such verses as were still legible on the page; they ran thus:

"For he hath looked down from the height of his sanctuary; from heaven did the Lord behold the earth;"

"To hear the groaning of the prisoner; to loose those that are appointed to death;"

"The children of thy servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before thee."

"Hum!" said Leonard to himself, "the quotation seems very appropriate. If one had faith in omens now, a man might say that this was a good one." And in his heart he believed it to be so.

Another hour's journey brought them to the point of the island along which they had been travelling.

"Ah," said Otter, "now I know the path again. This is the right stream, that to the left must be a new one. Had we taken it we should have lost our way, and perhaps have found it no more for days, or not at all."

"Say, Otter," said Leonard, "you escaped from this slave-camp. How did you do it--in a boat?"

"No, Baas. The Baas knows that I am strong, my Spirit who gave me ugliness gave me strength also to make up for it, and it is well, for had I been beautiful as you are, Baas, and not very strong, I should have been a slave now, or dead. With my chained hands I choked him who was set to watch me, and took his knife. Then by my strength I broke the irons--see, Baas, here are the scars of them to this day. When I broke them they cut into my flesh, but they were old irons that had been on many slaves, so I mastered them. Then as others came to kill me I threw myself into the water and dived, and they never saw me more. Afterwards I swam all the way, resting from time to time on the islands and from time to time running along the shore where the reeds were not too thick, till at length I escaped into the open country. I travelled four days to reach it, and most of that time I was in the water."

"And what did you feed on?"

"Roots and the eggs of birds."

"And did not the alligators try to eat you?"

"Yes, one, Baas, but I am quick in the water. I got upon the water-snake's back--ah! my Spirit was with me then--and I drove the

knife through his eye into his brain. Then I smeared myself over with his blood, and after that they did not touch me, for they knew the smell and thought that I was their brother."

"Say, Otter, are you not afraid of going back to this place?"

"Somewhat, Baas, for there is that hell of which you white people talk. But where the Baas goes there I can go also; Otter will not linger while you run. Also, Baas, I am not brave, no, no, yet I would look upon that Yellow Devil again, yes, if I myself must die to do it, and kill him with these hands."

And the dwarf dropped the paddle screaming "Kill him! kill him! kill him!" so loudly that the birds rose in affright from the marshes.

"Be quiet," said Leonard angrily; "do you want to bring the Arabs on us?"

But to himself he thought that he should be sorry for Pereira, alias the "Yellow Devil," if once Otter found a chance to fly at his throat.